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Janez Francisek Gnidovec, C.M.

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Some of our confreres are models of inspiration of how to fulfil the Vincentian vocation in bringing "the Good News to the poor." One of these is Janez Francisek (John Francis) Gnidovec.

The diocesan process for the cause of J. F. Gnidovec began in 1978 and was completed in Ljubljana in 1984. That same year the documentation was sent to the Congregation of the Saints in Rome.

Early years

Janez Francisek Gnidovec was born on 29 September 1873 in Veliki Lipovec (in the parish of Ajdovec, west of Novo mesto), and was baptized the next day in the parish church.

His small farming family, which was deeply Christian, taught him a love of God and of the needy and how to pray for guidance and help. It was their custom to pray in the morning and in the evening, before meals and to say the Angelus at noon.

Young J. F. Gnidovec's childhood was not happy. When he was seven, his mother died. At an early age he had to work on the farm, particularly tending the few cows and pigs. He learned to earn his food with his own hands early in life.

At seven, he attended an elementary school in Ajdovec, which had only a first grade class. So he continued his schooling in Novo mesto, where he was an outstanding student. During the school year he lived in Novo mesto. Not to overburden his father, he tutored other students to help support himself. In 1892, he completed high school with honours.

The high school J. F. Gnidovec attended was run by the Franciscan Fathers. Their example and teaching enabled him to grow in faith. It was at this time he began to visit the Blessed Sacrament daily.

Call to the priesthood

In February 1892 his father died. The only one he could turn to for advice was his parish priest. After praying for guidance and discussing his faith and future with the parish priest, Gnidovec moved to Ljubljana (capital city of Slovenia), where he entered the diocesan seminary to pursue his theological studies to become a priest. Again he excelled in his studies. He worked hard, not for marks, but to prepare for life and his vocation.

Pastoral worker

On 23 June 1896 he was ordained to the priesthood. Soon after he was assigned to a parish as an assistant where he worked zealously. His parishioners quickly realized that their new priest was a man of prayer and action. If he was not in the office, he was to be found in the church or visiting the sick and elderly. People talked about him as a holy man but his parish pastoral work did not last long.

Return to school

The Bishop of Ljubljana, the Most Rev. Anton B. Jeglic, founded the first all-Slovenian language classical college, which was a boarding school. He wanted to have good teachers and educators. In 1899, Bishop Jeglic sent Gnidovec to Vienna to study languages. Gnidovec combined his post-graduate studies with pastoral work, ministering to the Slovenian workers in Vienna known as "roasted" chestnut sellers. He earned his diploma in 1904. Then, for one year, he taught catechism in a high school in Kranj (Slovenia).

Teacher

In 1905, Gnidovec became a teacher in the diocesan-led classical college and was rector of the institution. He was liked and respected because of his knowledge and his personality. The teachers, as well as the students, looked upon him as a model. Often they saw him meditating in the chapel.

During the First World War, part of the college was turned into a "lazaret." Gnidovec visited the wounded soldiers almost daily, bringing them a word of encouragement and the sacraments. There were some Hungarian soldiers among the wounded, so he learned to speak Hungarian to help and to serve them better.

Entering the Congregation

However Fr. Gnidovec did not find inner peace and fulfilment in teaching and in his leadership role. His heart was with the needy and poor, to whom he wanted to bring the love of God, the Good News. Who knows how long he meditated and thought about entering the Congregation. On 6 December 1919, he said good-bye to the teachers and students and, on 7 December 1919, he was received and began his Internal Seminary. The provincial superior commented to the Superior General about the new member in a letter: "Gnidovec is a man of excellent spirit, ready for every task and he is a saint according to his confreres.

His spirituality was recognized and he was invited to become assistant to the director of the Internal Seminary. He longed to join the confreres in giving popular missions, but his work in the Congregation in the Province of Yugoslavia (now the Province of Slovenia) did not last long.

Nomination as Bishop

Fr. Gnidovec never tried to impress others with his degree from the University of Vienna or that he had been director of the diocesan college. He was truly humble.

When he was called by the Bishop of Ljubljana, he became very apprehensive and afraid of what this call could mean but he accepted the nomination and was consecrated as bishop on 30 November 1924. Those who knew him were not surprised when Gnidovec was chosen to become bishop.

Soon after the nomination was official among the priests of the Diocese of Skopje, one of the priests wanted to know more about the new bishop. "Is he (Gnidovec) a man of prayer and does he have patience?" When that priest got a positive answer he said: "We welcome our new bishop!"

Diocese of Skopje

The Diocese of Skopje in South Serbia (today Macedonia and south Yugoslavia, Kosovo region) was a real diaspora. Catholics were the minority of the population as 50% were Orthodox and over 40% were Muslims. It is hard to imagine their way of life after the Balkan War (1912-1914) and the First World War. Many political, ethnic and religious tensions were in evidence.

It was assumed that Bishop Gnidovec was the best choice since he was not Serb, nor Croatian, nor Albanian, but Slovenian. He was gifted in languages, pious and humble, but persevering and a hard worker.

His cathedral was a small church with a building adjacent to the church, which served as rectory, chancery office and residence at the same time. In his diocese there was a lack of priests, churches and chapels.

Seminary

As a shepherd of such a diverse and poor diocese, his first priority was the seminary. He knew that pastoral work could be carried out by well-trained and educated priests. He had to start from scratch, without any available funds, so he became a "beggar."

To achieve his first goal, he had to get priests. He returned to Slovenia where he met with bishops and the provincial superior of the Congregation of the Mission, asking for priests. His request was granted. A number of confreres and some diocesan clergy went to help out, and he also received material help to build a seminary.

Churches and Chapels

Many small Catholic communities in his diocese had no official place to worship. Whenever a priest came to celebrate Mass and to hear confessions, a private house or school served as the church. Again Bishop Gnidovec had to beg for a permit and funds. He had to knock on the same door many times. The government officials were Serbs, Orthodox, and did not want to see a Catholic church in their neighbourhood.

Charity

Many people in his diocese lived in poverty as well as in moral neglect. Bishop Gnidovec wanted to offer both spiritual and material help. Some of the government officials could not understand why the bishop was helping the poor and the beggars and even accused him of "promoting" laziness.

The poor and the needy found out very quickly that the bishop was sympathetic towards them, so they were frequent visitors at his door. Bishop Gnidovec did everything he could to lessen their suffering.

Congregations and fraternities

From his short term of pastoral work in parishes in Slovenia, Bishop Gnidovec knew that both the young and adults needed support and better knowledge of their faith. This support was even more needed in the diaspora. The Legion of Mary and some similar associations began to be formed. A very active member of the Legion of Mary in Skopje was a young girl, Agnes Bojadziev, who later became Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Fraternities of the Blessed Sacrament, Sacred Heart, and Catholic Action were also formed.

The devotions of First Fridays and First Saturdays were very dear to his heart. The bishop wanted families to accept these devotions to model themselves on the Holy Family. He knew that a life of faith would grow only in good and devoted families.

Religious publication

Bishop Gnidovec tried to be in touch with his flock, but to visit parishes and Catholic communities was not easy and simple. In some parts of his diocese, the only way to travel was on horseback, by bicycle or on foot.

He wrote to the priests regularly but the faithful were neglected. He already understood the importance of the media in informing and teaching the faithful. On 25 March 1928, the first issue of a new magazine, *Blagovijest* (The Good News) was published.

Ljaramani – secret Catholics

With the Ottoman rule in the Balkans, the Muslim religion spread and was forced upon the population. Some Catholics accepted the new religion. Those who did not want to become Muslims led two-fold lives. In public they acted as Muslims, in private they were Catholics. This lasted a few centuries. In order to have their children baptized, they travelled for hours, even days, to find a Catholic priest.

After the First World War, religious freedom was proclaimed in the Balkans and in Yugoslavia as well. But the **ljaramani** did not believe this to be so and did not want to change. They continued to be Muslims and Catholics at the same time.

Bishop Gnidovec tried hard to help them realize that there was nothing to fear. He invited the **ljaramani** to his office. In his visits to them, he encouraged and taught them, for they were lacking in their knowledge of Catholic faith.

Ecumenism

Since the Catholics of his diocese lived as a minority among the Orthodox and Muslims, Bishop Gnidovec tried to establish a good relationship among all of them, especially with the leaders of the two main religions. Some of them did not like to see or to hear about the Catholic bishop, priests and their faith. It was a long process but his honesty, goodness and respect for everybody finally gained him their respect. The Daughters of Charity also followed Bishop Gnidovec's example. They did not discriminate among people; therefore, the Muslims referred to them as angels.

As already mentioned, it was noticed by the seminarians in Ljubljana, by the parishioners where Gnidovec served, by the students and teachers in the college, that he was "a man of prayer and a hard worker." The priests of his diocese were of the same opinion.

When he was home, he said Mass for the faithful every day and heard confessions. When visiting a parish, his first stop was at the parish church or chapel. Although tired from travelling, he spent hours in the confessional.

Bishop Gnidovec's appearance was one of a frail man. It is true he never thought of himself. In all his work for the spiritual as well as material well-being of his flock, he never complained, he never seemed tired.

Someone who did not know Bishop Gnidovec well would have thought that he was an unassuming person. But when the rights of people and the faithful were disregarded, he was determined in obtaining their rights. He did not hesitate to go to the highest authorities for such matters.

When the priests were worried about his health his constant answer was that he had to be faithful, that he had to follow his motto: "I became all things to all men."

In 1938, weakness often overcame him. As the year approached its end, his frailty became more evident. With great difficulty, he led the liturgical celebration at Christmas. Finally, he gave in and went to Ljubljana for a medical checkup after the New Year. It was diagnosed that he had a brain tumour. He spent one month in the hospital and in spite of enormous pain, he did not complain. He died on 3 February 1939, which was a First Friday.

When news of his death reached his diocese, the priests and people were deeply saddened. Ordinary people, even Muslims, said: "A saint has died."

Bishop Gnidovec never intended or wished to be famous or well-known, but he wanted his name in the Book of Life.

It seems that God gave Gnidovec two assignments: first, to be rector of the college in Ljubljana and, second, to be bishop of Skopje. Gnidovec had two difficult beginnings.

Under the leadership of the Most Rev. Jeglic, Bishop of Ljubljana, Gnidovec was a founding member of the first Slovenian Catholic Classical College. He served in education and spiritual guidance to the students for 14 years. During these 14 years he grew spiritually and transplanted that growth into the hearts of his students. Many of them expressed profound memories of him.

He did not want to be a public figure. He entered the Congregation to become an ordinary missionary. But he could not hide from God.

As bishop, he accepted a new field with fervour and zeal. Again, he worked tirelessly as a real shepherd for 14 years. The tensions and divisions, so often instigated by government officials, among the Catholics, Orthodox and Muslims, the Serbs and Albanians, caused Bishop Gnidovec much pain. But in spite of all the difficulties he was true to his motto: "I became all things to all men." He remained a real Vincentian.